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Subaltern Struggles and the Global Media in Koodankulam and Kashmir

Sudheesh Ramapurath Chemmencheri

London School of Economics¹

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Abstract

This paper analyses the interactions between subaltern struggles and the global media, with special reference to the ways in which the subaltern find opportunities in the media to make their voices heard. The paper argues that rather than losing their state of subalternity in the process of gaining a voice through media exposure, media representation reinforces the subaltern identity of the marginalised. Scrutinising the politics of representation in the media representation of the Koodankulam anti-nuclear protests and the Kashmir conflict in India, this essay draws on insights from post-colonial studies to explore new ways to read the work of the global media in their coverage of the subaltern.

Keywords: subaltern, media studies, post-colonial studies, social movements, Koodankulam, Kashmir

¹ I thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments. The basic argument of this essay was developed at the LSE while I was pursuing a Masters in Social Policy and Development.

When the international mainstream media covers resistance in the third world, they attempt to capture and represent a subaltern voice. But what happens to subalternity post mediation? Does it lose its unique position, after mediation provides a way to make its voice heard at the altars of power? Or does subalternity morph and transformatively adapt itself to the new scenario of mediation? Through examples of mainstream mediation, as well as invited spaces for self-mediation,² I argue that rather than losing the quality of subalternity after accessing avenues of speaking, subalternity is reinforced by the global media. In their quest for social change, the subaltern thus becomes the mediated subaltern, exploiting new media opportunity structures, such as programmes/columns in the mainstream media dedicated to subaltern struggles, internet-based platforms etc. Below, I demonstrate how an epistemic reorientation of media narratives on subaltern politics can be sparked by foregrounding the politics of *representation* in the Marxian-Spivakian sense, with reference to the cases of the Koodankulam anti-nuclear protests and the Kashmir conflict in India. This paper is also an attempt to formulate the concrete ways in which we might examine the synergies between post-colonial insights and mediation theories as they inform social change.

Theoretical Conflicts

The term ‘subaltern’ has emerged as a synonym for the marginalised, following its usage by Antonio Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks, possibly as a substitute for the term ‘proletariat’,

² By self-mediation, I refer to the new spaces available for the non-journalists to express their opinion. These can range from personal blogs to invited columns in the mainstream media.

devised to escape the censorship regime of his jailors.³ The term was taken up by Ranajit Guha, who defined it as ‘the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all...elite’. This became the point of departure for the Subaltern Studies collective in South Asian historiography.⁴ In her groundbreaking essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ Gayatri Spivak pointed out that the subaltern is always represented by others who speak on her behalf, suggesting that subalternity is entwined with a certain degree of voicelessness.⁵ Spivak, through her oft-quoted essay title, called into question the collective’s efforts to speak for the subaltern. As Jay Maggio notes, speaking for the subaltern does not retrieve a subaltern voice, for ‘the act of empowering itself has a silencing effect’.⁶ The real question, then, is if the subaltern can be heard, as the act of speaking is invalidated by the unwillingness on the listener’s part to hear.

The hyper-globalised media environment of late modernity, which records and transmits the resistance movements of the marginalised, might suggest that the subaltern can indeed speak, be heard, *perform* resistance, challenge power structures, and gain social mobility.⁷ Spivak herself notes in a recent essay that ‘in the interim years, through the electronic circuits of globalisation, the subaltern has become greatly permeable’.⁸ This suggests that subalternity is not a frozen

³Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2007), pp.1-10.

⁴ Ranajit Guha, *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.8. For further analysis of the project, see the special issue, edited by Debjani Ganguly, ‘Subaltern Studies 30 Years On’, *South Asia*, March 2015.

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Can the Subaltern Speak? Republished in Rosalind Morris (ed.). *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). pp. 21-80

⁶ Jay Maggio, ‘Can the Subaltern Be Heard?: Political Theory, Translation, Representation, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.’ *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* Vol. 32 (2007), p. 427.

⁷ On performance, see William K Carroll and R.S. Ratner, ‘Media Strategies and Political Projects: A Comparative Study of Social Movements’, in *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 24, no.1 (1999), pp.1-34.

⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular’, in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 8, no.4 (2006), p.483

identity with fixed contours and concretised details, but a changing one, responding to time and context. Also, since globalisation is in part characterised by the integration of previously separate economic and cultural spaces, the subaltern faces new challenges in the space where she stands, as I will demonstrate below. The subaltern, therefore, stands before spatiotemporal forces of change, attempting to permeate the membrane of subalternity. Mediation is engaged in a two-way interaction with the subaltern – the media covers the subaltern in its frenzy to find news, but also, the subaltern steps into the playground of mediation, in search of new possibilities of voicing her opinion. If subalternity as an identity is fractured, then a theoretical conflict emerges between the work of media and the arguments of the subaltern school. This essay thus asks if the subaltern today can claim to be voiceless, and if not, what work mediation does to the identity of subalternity. The enquiry is necessitated by the current vagueness on how the global media ecology plays out at the stratum of the subaltern, acknowledging, as Rao does, that ‘globalization reveals itself best at the site of the strategies and practices which have been developed by local communities’.⁹ In search of clarification, Rao calls for ‘an epistemic reorientation’ of how media produces new narratives.¹⁰ This essay is an effort in this direction, as it attempts to capture how the global media lens captures the subaltern in India and thereby seeks to understand the working of media narratives with respect to their representation.

Resistance movements have been of interest to the media for decades now. Melucci points out that protest movements aid in shaping collective identities.¹¹ In fact, as Melucci describes it,

⁹Shakuntala Rao, ‘The Local in Global Media Ethics’, in *Journalism Studies*, Vol.12, no.6 (2011), pp. 780-790

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 780.

¹¹Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.63

‘collective action, by the sheer fact of its existence, represents in its very form and models of organization a message broadcast to the rest of society’.¹² Mediation can therefore be said to play an important role in relaying these identity-constructs and messages. In the age of globalization, local messages are transmitted to an international audience, while simultaneously facilitating the globalization of the movement itself.¹³ The interface between the global media and the subaltern emerges as a fertile field of enquiry in this backdrop. This paper thus adopts the methodological route of analysing *global* English-language media representations of subaltern protests to understand their conversation. I do not wish to suggest that the emergence of the media-subaltern interface is the only route by which the subaltern becomes a global citizen. Rather, it is one of the scattered and amorphous ways in which the subaltern comes in contact with a global audience. A principal reason for pointing this out is the realities of representation that play out when the mediation-subaltern interface functions. It need not be the case that every subaltern in a movement is heard, and indeed, the choices regarding interactions with the media may be made by activist representatives. A close scrutiny of the media-activist dynamics can be found in Cammaerts, who proposes the concept of *media opportunity structures* to bring together the realms of social movements and media studies into a single analytic frame.¹⁴ According to Cammaerts, activists, aware of the instrumental and discursive value of media exposure, tap into the available opportunities of mediation based on their understanding of how the media operates, simultaneously negotiating the structural constraints, such as bias, changing public opinion and technological

¹² *Ibid.*, p.9.

¹³ Simon Cottle, ‘Reporting Demonstrations: the Changing Media Politics of Dissent’, in *Media Culture Society*, Vol. 30, no. 6 (2008), pp.853-872.

¹⁴ Bart Cammaerts, ‘Protest Logics and the Mediation Opportunity Structure’, in *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2012), pp.117-134.

hurdles. Further, Cammaerts points out that the media opportunity structures can influence protest logics and ‘can even become constitutive of protest’.¹⁵ In this sense, the process of mediation becomes a close conversation between the protesters and the media, going beyond just reporting.

But the conversation itself is facilitated through reporting, which raises issues of *representation*. The subaltern is today subjected to round-the-clock mediation, which is part of what Thumim calls an ‘open-ended and ongoing process of meaning making’.¹⁶ But when Thumim points out that it remains to be seen if everyone has equal opportunities to speak for themselves, the issue of subaltern representation looms large. As Shome and Hegde point out, the ‘politics of post-coloniality’, which is nothing but the politics of the subaltern representation, is ‘centrally imbricated in the politics of communication’.¹⁷ It thus becomes necessary to unpack the politics of representation constituted within the politics of communication to be able to interrogate the status of subalternity. It should be noted that subaltern politics, has in fact transcended the boundaries of post-colonial studies and has emerged as a lens to study disparate contexts involving representation, making the term subaltern an analytic tool. As Spivak notes, ‘subalternity cannot be generalised according to a hegemonic logic. That is what makes it subaltern. Yet it is a category and therefore repeatable’¹⁸. While analysing my case studies, I attempt a Spivakian ‘repetition’ of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.120.

¹⁶ Nancy Thumim, ‘Everyone has a Story to Tell: Mediation and Self-Representation in Two UK Institutions,’ in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 12, no. 6 (2009), p.618.

¹⁷ Raka Shome and Radha S. Hegde, ‘Postcolonial Approaches to Communication: Charting the Terrain, Engaging the Intersections’, in *Communication Theory*, Vol. 12, no.3 (2002), p.249

¹⁸ Spivak, ‘Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular’, p.475. For an example of the repeatability of the term subaltern, see Hakan Seckinelgin, ‘Global Civil Society as Shepherd: Global Sexualities and the Limits of Solidarity from a Distance’, in *Critical Social Policy online* (2012), pp. 1-20 [<http://csp.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/04/19/0261018312439363>, accessed 27 Oct. 2012] Seckinelgin uses this analytic tool to comprehend Western representation of third world LGBT rights discourses. Also see Bruce Robbins, ‘Soul Making: Gayatri Spivak on Upward Mobility,’ in *Cultural Studies* Vol. 17(2003), pp.16–26

the term subaltern, meaning that it stands for those who have been at the receiving end of hegemonic structures and is defined according to the context or particular social movement taken for consideration.

To understand representation, I return to Spivak, who, explaining Marx's deliberation on representation in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, reiterates the difference between representation and re-presentation.¹⁹ Representation (*vertretung*, verb-*vertreten*) can be understood as speaking for, for example, when a representative substitutes his constituency; whereas re-presentation (*darstellung*, verb-*darstellen*) can be understood as presenting again, say, in a painting. The difference is that between 'a proxy and a portrait', Spivak points out.²⁰ As the case studies show, the media are involved in a complex negotiation between the two versions of representation at the interface with the subaltern. Global media, driven by an increased awareness of ethics, constantly negotiate between maintaining fair amount of coverage and achieving accurate coverage. It is in the former that we find overlaps with representation as *vertretung* and in the latter that we find overlaps with representation as re-presentation or *darstellung*. I argue that during these constant negotiations, the subaltern actually re-inscribe and reinforce their identity of subalternity, rather than losing it on account of losing muteness. That is, muteness stops being the defining logic of subalternity, opening up other layers of this identity to the fore. The *politics* of representation is revealed when it is noted that whether the subaltern is represented or re-presented is a consequence of how protest movements exploit media opportunity structures, as much as it is the consequence of the narrative techniques used by the media to cover the subaltern.

¹⁹ Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), p. 29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Representation also gains pertinence in the wake of alleged forms of new racist connotations that creep into the activities of global institutions that engage with the third world subaltern when these institutions tend to be patronising of the work of the subaltern subject with a parodic focus on subaltern *agency*.²¹ A closer scrutiny of this tendency is necessitated by the tendency of the Western media, especially those working in English, to double as international media. The parodic focus is revealed in those representations which foreground subaltern agency, while tacitly assuming that the subaltern lacked agency beforehand, but has found it through mediated struggles. Wilson, giving an example, points out that development campaigns by Western organisations that emphasise gender inclusion, such as Oxfam, portray third world women as content workers, so obliterating their daily struggles.²² Thus, when scrutinising the mediation of the subaltern, one also needs to consider whether mediation does the work of a certain parodical representation of protests, overshadowing internal struggles, for example those of women.

Mediation Reinforces Subalternity

I see the subaltern resistance movements in India today as falling into a set of recognisable broad categories, two of which are taken up here. The purpose is not to compartmentalise them into rigid boxes, but to lay out the spectrum of subaltern struggles that are going on in India, each with its own constitutive logic, but exhibiting a certain discernible characteristic of subalternity. They might be fought for different reasons, but they place the people involved at the receiving end of

²¹ Kalpana Wilson, "'Race', Gender and Neoliberalism: Changing Visual Representations in Development', in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2011), pp. 315–331.

²² Wilson, p.323.

structural discrimination or the lower end of power continuum. This demonstrates the repeatability of the term subaltern; it is according to this logic that I define the protesters in the case studies as subaltern. While one category of protests includes the remnants of protracted, unfinished and inconclusive struggles (such as the protests against state militarisation in Kashmir and Manipur), the other includes struggles that have been episodic, reacting to challenges posed by the fallout of economic growth, such as protests against dams or nuclear power plants. While the former have remained localised and enmeshed in the history and geography of the region (for instance, the annexation of Kashmir or Manipur to post-colonial India), the latter have shifted ground and indicate retaliation towards the interruption in the history or geography of the region by the growth-led neoliberal agenda, symbolised by dams and nuclear power plants. With the added dimension of mediation, the alterations to subalternity take place in ways that are embedded in the politics of representation. Bringing out the repeatability of the term subaltern enables the scrutiny of these disparate struggles within the same discussion; additionally, these struggles have received extensive coverage in the global media, providing rich scope for interrogating their representation. I will now turn to the Koodankulam anti-nuclear protests in detail and the Kashmir conflict in passing to analyse these narratives.

The Koodankulam anti-nuclear protests

The subaltern emerges as an identifiable group in media narratives in the case of the Koodankulam nuclear protests, which started in 2011, when the Indian state redeemed a 1998 civil nuclear agreement with Russia. The original agreement was signed two months after India tested its nuclear weapons in 1998, finding renewed relevance in India's new position as an emerging

economy, hungry for energy to support its industries. The Kudankulam-1 reactor in Tamil Nadu gained criticality on 13 July 2013,²³ after the Supreme Court of India gave it the green signal. The verdict came as a setback to the protesters, who had been opposing the plant since 2011 under an umbrella campaign called the People's Movement against Nuclear Energy (PMANE). The PMANE suddenly brought to media screens the village of Idinthakarai ('fallen coast' in Tamil), next to Koodankulam, and its men, women and children, who came out in masses to form human chains and hunger strike groups against the construction of the power plant.²⁴ Most of the protesters were fishermen belonging to the Most Backward Classes and Scheduled Castes (these two categories include both Hindus and Christians), historically marginalised and subject to attacks from the nobles and princes who ruled over the region.²⁵

The characterisation of the fishing folk as subaltern, however, needs to be contextualised against the backdrop of their struggle, rather than imposing an academically-constructed subalternity on them with reference only to historical subordination. In the Koodankulam protests, the fishing folk are positioned in opposition to the Indian state, the upper class and the larger middle class. The latter, with its aspirations of upward social mobility and electoral power, have come to constitute a new kind of elite.²⁶ The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam-led government of the state of Tamil Nadu did not support the protesters, and, instead, ordered a police

²³ 'Power Reactor Information System.' International Atomic Energy Agency (03 August 2014) [<http://www.iaea.org/PRIS/CountryStatistics/CountryDetails.aspx?current=IN>, accessed 10 August 2014]

²⁴ 'Anti-Kudankulam Activists to Raise Protest to Next Level.' The Hindu (17 August 2013) [<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/antikudankulam-activists-to-raise-protest-to-next-level/article5032106.ece>, accessed 10 August 2014]

²⁵ Felix Wilfred, 'Christianity in Hindu Polytheistic Structural Mould. Converts in Southern Tamilnadu Respond to an Alien Religion During the Vasco da Gama Epoch', in *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, 103 (1998), p.67-86

²⁶ Partha Chatterjee, 'Democracy and Economic Transformation in India', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIII, No. 16 (2008), pp. 53-62

clamp-down that cut off the village from the rest of the country, blocking the movement of essential goods. Meanwhile, the central government refused to enter into any dialogue with the protesters. While the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd., a central government institution, arrayed scientific facts to assert the safety of the plant, the then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, claimed that the protests were fuelled by foreign interests. This polarisation of the state and subaltern found an instant resonance in media narratives. For instance, the *Washington Post* reported:

In February, [Prime Minister Manmohan] Singh told *Science* magazine that U.S.-based nongovernmental groups were helping protesters stall the opening of the reactor, and the government charged several hundred protesters with sedition this year. Protesters say their effort is funded by donations from the community. “This is a fight to save democracy, which is slipping away from our hands,” said S.P. Udaykumar, a teacher-turned-activist who heads the People’s Movement Against Nuclear Energy, an activist group. “The government cannot force a reactor on us against our will.”²⁷

The fisher folk are thus constructed as countering not only the state’s development agenda, but also its ‘scientific’ reasoning regarding the safety of the reactor. Interestingly, media narratives also showed the subaltern as attempting scientific reasoning as well, only to be trampled by the state argument of larger public interest. This can be further seen in the report from *Russia Today*:

²⁷ Rama Lakshmi, ‘India Shuts Down Aid Groups over Anti-Nuclear Protests’, *the Washington Post* (25 February 2012) [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/indias-prime-minister-lashes-out-at-foreign-ngos/2012/02/24/gIQAb7wrYR_story.html, accessed 05 July 2014]

The protesters claimed the nuclear plant is “unsafe,” said it endangers environment in the region heavily reliant on fishing, and pointed at the 1 million population in the surrounding area, which would be “impossible” for the government to evacuate in case of emergency. However, the Supreme Court of India finally ruled that the plant is “safe and secure and it is necessary for larger public interest and economic growth of the country,” adding that “India cannot afford to be a nuclear isolated nation,” and rejecting the protesters’ appeals. While some opponents simply denounced the court’s decision, with a lawyer representing the protesters calling it “an unfortunate and a terrible judgement which shows the establishmentarian mindset of the Supreme Court judges,” others said there is evidence of the country’s Atomic Energy Regulatory Board’s (AERB) failure to enforce the necessary safety measures, which the court should have taken into account.²⁸

The ‘establishmentarian mindset’ of the judges referred to above indicates how the state has come to occupy the oppositional position in this struggle, creating the other in the protesters. A few media narratives went to the extent of showing the bizarre levels to which state reaction to the resistance can go:

Just last week, a government sponsored team of psychiatrists from the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS) was dispatched to ‘counsel’ allegedly benighted locals into seeing the benefits of a structure they fear will poison their health, and the health of the aquatic creatures on which so much of their

²⁸ ‘India to Launch Nuke Power Plant despite Protests’, Russia Today (8 June 2013) [<http://rt.com/news/india-kudankulam-nuclear-plant-416/>, accessed 10 July 2014]

local economy depends – as if an opposition to nuclear power somehow ran parallel to marital problems, or fears of sexual intimacy.²⁹

Thus, the protesters can be clearly seen as standing at the lower end of the power continuum in the media. While the media have shown considerable sympathy for subaltern struggles while covering them by bringing out the nature of state reaction, their narratives also raise the question of whether subaltern resistance constitutes an organic form of news material, ready to be shot and shown.³⁰ For instance, according to the *New York Times*:

On Thursday, the antinuclear activists formed a human chain in the waters of the Bay of Bengal, and later that day the Supreme Court refused to block the Nuclear Power Corporation of India from loading fuel for the Kudankulam power plant... ‘Emotions are high after the Supreme Court refused to stay the fuel loading,’ said Amritharaj Stephen, a freelance photographer and a protester who is documenting the movement.³¹

The representation of subaltern struggle is here achieved through the reporting of the human chain, formed on the same day that the Supreme Court chose to overlook the struggle, when ‘emotions were high’. By focusing on the emotions and acts of resistance, media representation has gone for the affective and performative aspects of the movement respectively. Some other media narratives, meanwhile, achieved the same through re-presentation, i.e. narratives that go

²⁹ Michael Edison Hayden. ‘As Tamil Nadu Nuclear Plant Opening nears, Protests Enter ‘Death Throes’’, *the New York Times* (29 May 2012) [http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/as-tamil-nadu-nuclear-plant-opening-nears-protests-enter-death-throes/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0, accessed 10 July 2014]

³⁰ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who pointed this out.

³¹ Anupama Chandrasekaran, ‘In Kudankulam, Waiting for the Government to React’, *the New York Times*, (18 September 2012) [<http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/18/in-kudankulam-waiting-for-the-government-to-react/>, accessed 10 July 2014]

beyond just reporting and portraying the resistance acts as performative by choice in order to exploit the opportunity structures offered by the establishment of new media outlets in the country:

Gone are the days when picketing, candlelight vigils, marches or hunger strikes were enough to guarantee your cause a spot on prime-time television in India. No matter how grave or frivolous the cause, modern protesters employ far more creative tactics to draw attention. On Wednesday, 1,500 villagers, including several children, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu buried themselves in the sand to their waists for six hours in the latest demonstration against the building of the Kudankulam nuclear plant. The protesters, who are from fishing families from the surrounding districts, are worried that once the plant is active it will contaminate the fish, ruining their livelihoods...Extreme protests have been the mainstay of activists around the world for years, but in India, which popularized and perfected the nonviolent protest and the quietly powerful hunger strike, there has been a recent rush to embrace increasingly unusual forms of agitation. Some attribute their rise to the prevalence of new television channels and social media in India, other to deeper causes.³²

Affect and performance, thus, constitute the staple of media narratives. The most intriguing feature of this is that the affective performative aspects of the resistance coexists with its portrayal as being

³²Neha Thirani. 'India, Home of the Nonviolent Protest Embraces More Extreme Dissent', *the New York Times* (28 September 2012) [<http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/28/india-home-of-the-nonviolent-protest-embraces-more-extreme-dissent/>, accessed 10 July 2014].

engaged in dialogue and discussion, which are traditionally seen as aspects of deliberative democracy. For instance, the report from the *New York Times* quoted above also mentions:

“We have been saying that the government should start a discussion with us,” said Mr. Udayakumar by telephone from an undisclosed location on Monday. “Four or five days ago we offered to talk and soul search, but it wasn’t taken up by the state government. This isn’t an ego issue. This is about democracy. If majority of people object to a project, it is the government’s duty to listen to them and work toward a midpoint.”³³

This co-existence of the two sides of a resistance movement – affective performative and deliberative – gives an indication of how the global media plays out at the stratum of the subaltern. The danger, however, is when the media look for an authentic subaltern in this pursuit. To elaborate, consider this excerpt:

This most recent wave of protests is distinguished by a hunger strike, which was initiated on May 1st, 2012. According to the People’s Movement Against Nuclear Energy (PMANE), 302 women and 24 men are engaged in a ‘fast until death’ hunger strike, but it remains difficult to ascertain with any degree of authority how many of these men and women are in fact supplementing their diet in some way for the preservation of health and safety and to what degree that might be the case. Given the excruciating timeline of the KNPP [Koodankulam Nuclear Power Plant] battle, such a choice might be deemed wise.³⁴

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Hayden, ‘As Tamil Nadu Nuclear Plant Opening nears, Protests Enter ‘Death Throes’ (internet reference details in footnote 29)

The depiction here goes beyond mere representation and re-presents the struggle as constituting protesters who *might be* reneging on their commitment to the struggle while engaged in the performative act of a hunger strike. The sympathy for subaltern, then, takes the colour of search for a true, suffering subaltern.

A major trend in global mediation of protests like the one in Koodankulam is the heightened use of synecdoche, in which the part is supposed to represent the whole. As Spivak pointed out, in synecdoche, ‘agency presumes collectivity’.³⁵ In reporting the Koodankulam protests, the BBC Tamil centres its reporting on the testimonies of the leader Dr. Udayakumar (whose name also appeared in some of the excerpts above), a doctoral degree holder from the University of Hawaii.³⁶ BBC Tamil is a special case, because it has a regional focus through its language domain and global audience base, while maintaining a strict global outlook. It is headquartered in London. This has to be read along with the observation by T.N. Ninan that the Indian media is no longer the same as media in India.³⁷ It is no longer remarkable that global media outlets have dedicated columns on India or round-the-clock coverage on stories from the subcontinent.³⁸ Udayakumar’s commentary on the Koodankulam protests foregrounds the state suppression of the protest through police ambush, as well as the risks involved in building a nuclear power plant on the seashore by drawing analogies with the nuclear leakage in Fukushima, Japan, following the 2011 earthquake. Such reporting attempts to give a voice to the subalterns directly,

³⁵ Spivak, ‘Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular’, p.480.

³⁶ ‘Nidhi Edhu? Koodankulam Poraatakuzhuvinar Badhil’ (Tamil – Whose funds? Koodankulam Protesters’ Reply), *BBC Tamil* (12 November 2011) [http://www.bbc.co.uk/tamil/multimedia/2011/11/111112_koodankulamudayakumar.shtml, accessed 28 March 2013]

³⁷ T.N. Ninan, ‘The Changing Indian Media Scene’, *Seminar* (1 January 2007) [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHwlXtF3zXs>, accessed 10 February 2013]

³⁸ The India Ink series on the New York Times or Spotlight India on Al Jazeera are prominent examples.

hearing their logic, in which process the leader (who is taken to represent the collective) asserts and reasserts the status of subalternity through references to state oppression. The danger that lurks behind this discourse is the lack of clarity on the level of understanding regarding the scientific debate amongst the rank-and-file in the protest. The portrayal also obliterates the power struggles within the movement, such as the non-participation of women in decision-making, although they do participate in the protests in large numbers.³⁹ The leader, in another effort to reassert subalternity, rejects any dialogue with the politicians, calling them elite, corrupt and inimical to the subaltern cause.⁴⁰ Subalternity is further asserted here by the protest leader invoking Gandhian values of non-violence and dialogue as the framework of the protests, as against the state's use of brute force. The subaltern, therefore, speaks and is heard, but, instead of losing subalternity, it is reinforced through the appropriation of media opportunity structures.

This discussion on global mediation would be incomplete if it were not critically appraised for the new invited spaces of self-mediation. For instance, Greenpeace included a set of articles purportedly written by people on the ground in Koodankulam. Consider this excerpt from the article titled *Koodankulam Protesters Tell Their Story*:

Today was my third day at Idinthakarai. Finally after two days I could catch some sleep in the parish house where the priests stay. The people of Idinthakarai sleep under the same roof because they fear that the police repression might happen again at night.

People have been threatened by the police repeatedly. The house I stayed at was full

³⁹ Mathrubhumi Weekly (4 June 2012), p.10

⁴⁰ '40 Naalil Min Urpathiyai Thuvakka Mudiyaathu' (Tamil – Power Generation cannot Start in 40 days), *BBC Tamil* (23 April 2012) [http://www.bbc.co.uk/tamil/multimedia/2012/04/120423_udayakumar.shtml, accessed 28 March 2013]

with the local media and villagers so I had to manage in the little space I got to sleep. By the time I woke up at 8 am everybody was already ready and it made me feel a little embarrassed.⁴¹

Here the police metonymically represent the law and the state, and state repression is invoked again to emphasise subalternity. Marx claimed in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* that the proletariat form a *class* only insofar as they live under economic conditions that delineate them from other classes, and do not form a class insofar as this similarity in their identity conditions fails to invoke ‘a feeling of community’⁴². By contrast, the self-mediated excerpt above proves that the protesters indeed formed a community, ‘sleeping under the same roof’. Of course, like all identity constructions, the assertion of subalternity also involves constructing an ‘other’, which here becomes manifest in the state. The reference to the media and villagers sleeping together in the crowded house and waking up the next day shows how the protest itself has internalised media involvement as a core part of this ‘othering’. Indeed Greenpeace declared its open support to the protests.⁴³ This reiterates my argument that mediation, rather than taking away the quality of subalternity, simply reinforces it in the process of representing the protesters.

What emerges is a picture wherein the engagement of the media with the subaltern is not a given, but is circumstantial; just as the subaltern seeks media opportunity structures to voice

⁴¹Koodankulam Protesters Tell Their Story. Greenpeace (19 September 2012). [<http://www.greenpeace.org/india/en/Press/Greenpeace-condemns-crackdown-on-anti-nuclear-protesters/>, accessed 5 April 2013].

⁴² Spivak, ‘Appendix - Can the Subaltern Speak?’, pp. 244-245.

⁴³Greenpeace Condemns Attack on Anti-Nuclear Protests, *Greenpeace* (19 March 2012) [<http://www.greenpeace.org/india/en/Press/Greenpeace-condemns-crackdown-on-anti-nuclear-protesters/>, accessed 5 April 2013].

their opinions, the media is conditioned by its own opportunity structures of presenting stories. These could be political, budgetary, ideological, or, as in this case, an acceptance of the verdict of the highest court in the country as the final word on the matter. In an indirect way, the subaltern's interaction with media is not just a struggle with the media opportunity structures, but also the media's own struggles with opportunity structures in the resistance movements. The politics of representation is, in turn, determined by a combination of these struggles. The reinforcement of subalternity that was achieved has its limitations in the particular forms these representational activities can take. The external political, judicial factors that we saw as influencing these activities are not insignificant 'noises', but significant contributors to the process that shapes representation. What can also be seen in the Koodankulam case is that the subaltern interest, which in this case would mean concerns about a nuclear disaster, was considered of lower importance compared to the larger 'public interest' of the country. Though this is a blow to recognising subaltern struggles, it curiously reiterates the oppositional position of the subaltern to the rest. By rest, as pointed out earlier, is meant the larger aspirational public whose desire for growth and the associated energy needs positions it against the struggles of the protesters on the ground. What emerges is not so much an effacement of subalternity, but, rather, an instantiation of the recognition of subaltern concerns as fundamentally linked in their opposition to the needs and aspirations of the elite. The Koodankulam episode showed how the media was proactive in highlighting this opposition in its own terms, and through the lens of the verdict after that.

Kashmir

Representation in the global media becomes problematic when the protest needs to be brought to a wider global audience through the global media, but has to succumb to the limitations of finding a representative. As Marx said in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, ‘*Sie können sich nicht vertreten, sie müssen vertreten werden*’ (they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented).⁴⁴ The predicament arises when the media relies on cherry-picked speakers as proxies. To give an example from a protracted subaltern struggle, the conflict in Kashmir is covered in *Democracy Now*, an American news portal that presents itself as distinct from the mainstream, through the voice of Arundhati Roy, an articulate, English-speaking author from India.⁴⁵ Roy, who has voiced several struggles in recent decades, highlights the military’s oppression of the people, thereby reinforcing their subalternity. This shows that the sympathisers of subaltern media also use the opportunity structures available in the global media and are involved in asserting the subalternity of the protesters before a global audience. Such *vertretung* could be juxtaposed with instances of *darstellung*, wherein attempts to portray the real picture through photographs inadvertently elide the day-to-day struggles of the Kashmiri people regarding food, education and electricity. An instance is the photo-essay on

⁴⁴ Cited in Neil Larsen, *Determinations: Essays on the Theory, Narrative and Nation in the Americas* (New York: Verso, 2001), p.62.

⁴⁵ See ‘Arundhati Roy on Empire, the Corporate Media, Indian Politics, Her Childhood and War’, *Democracy Now* (12 May 2003) [http://www.democracynow.org/2003/5/12/arundhati_roy_on_empire_the_corporate, accessed 5 April 2013]; ‘Arundhati Roy on India, Iraq, U.S. Empire and Dissent’, *Democracy Now* (23 May 2006) [http://www.democracynow.org/2006/5/23/arundhati_roy_on_india_iraq_u, accessed 5 April 2013]; and ‘Arundhati Roy and Sanjay Kak on Context for Kashmir Unrest after Hanging of Afzal Guru’, *Democracy Now* (18 March 2013) [Available online at http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2013/3/18/part_2_arundhati_roy_sanjay_kak_on_context_for_kashmir_unrest_after_hanging_of_afzal_guru. Accessed 5 April 2013].

the Kashmir conflict on Al Jazeera that showcases the state oppression of the Kashmiri people and their opposition to the Indian state, but does not delve into the daily struggles for basic needs.⁴⁶

Some background of the Kashmir conflict is required here, although this has been a topic of heated debate that has produced volumes of argument and counterargument. Any attempt at summarising, therefore, cannot avoid the risk of missing detail. At the time of independence in 1947, Kashmir was a Muslim-majority state with a Hindu ruler, who, under the threat of attack from across the newly created boundary between India and Pakistan, decided to join India. As a Muslim-majority region, Pakistan claimed that Kashmir should join its dominion, a demand that was rejected by India. The political details of the debate are convoluted, with recent research showing that Kashmir's accession to India and the granting of special rights to the state in the Indian constitution were always conditional on the promise of including the Kashmiri people's will in any political solution reached between India and Pakistan. This is often interpreted as the promise of self-determination that never materialised.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the Kashmiri people have been caught in a ceaseless spree of violence – by separatists within, extremists outside and the Indian military. This position of the people at the lower end of the power continuum allows for the use of the term subaltern in this case.⁴⁸ The

⁴⁶ 'Kashmir: a Wounded Paradise', *Al Jazeera* (5 August 2011) [<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2011/08/201181143630563904.html>, accessed 3 April 2013].

⁴⁷ A.G. Noorani, *Kashmir Dispute 1947-2012* (Karachi: Oxford University Press. 2013), pp.1-560.

⁴⁸ The subaltern struggle in Kashmir has been well documented already in a number of works. Examples include John G Cockell, 'Ethnic Nationalism and Subaltern Political Process: Exploring Autonomous Democratic Action in Kashmir', in *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2000), pp. 319-345; Nyla Ali Khan, *The Parchment of Kashmir: History, Society and Polity* (New Delhi: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

role of media in Kashmir has also been subjected to criticism, though these are mostly narratives on politics rather than the politics of the narratives.⁴⁹

The BBC News website maintains a webpage titled ‘The Future of Kashmir’ that offers possible solutions to the Kashmir conflict in the form of ‘scenarios’.⁵⁰ The premise of the conflict, that the Hindu king of Muslim-majority Kashmir decided to join India and not Pakistan after independence from colonial rule, resulting in three wars between the two countries, is carefully laid out in these webpages. The seven ‘scenarios’ that BBC offers in essence ask whether Kashmir Valley, a constituent region of Kashmir and the site of conflict, should join India or Pakistan, or become sovereign. With every ‘scenario’ mentioned, an appended table reminds the readers of the religious composition of the different constituent regions of Kashmir: Kashmir Valley, Azad Kashmir and Northern Areas are majority Muslim; Jammu is majority Hindu; and Ladakh is majority Buddhist, suggesting that any solution should necessarily involve the religious contours of the constituent regions. This re-presentation or *darstellung* thus involves the BBC’s understanding of the conflict of Kashmir rather than speaking for Kashmiris, even as its original intent was to highlight the conflict before the international audience. Additionally, this brings out the curious limitation of mediation – while the subalternity of Kashmiris as a people (or peoples, in the BBC’s version, considering its preoccupation with the constituent regions, whose religious distinctness it emphasises) in

⁴⁹ See for example, Pragya Tiwari, ‘The Valley’s Media is Being Throttled’. *Tehelka* (05 February 2011) [http://archive.tehelka.com/story_main48.asp?filename=Ne050211TheValley.asp, accessed 27 July 2014]; Gautam Navlakha, Rita Manchanda and Tapan K. Bose, “Political Situation in Kashmir-Duped by Media and Government. *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol.XXXI, No. 29 (1996), pp. 1927-1931

⁵⁰ ‘The Future of Kashmir’, *BBC News* (Undated Webpages) [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/south_asia/03/kashmir_future/html/6.stm (homepage), accessed 23 April 2013]

conflict is reiterated by the media, there are still ways in which local voices can be muzzled. Meanwhile, the affective and performative aspects that we saw feeding into media narratives on Koodankulam crept into the coverage on Kashmir as well. To cite an instance, the Kashmiris took to the streets *en masse* in 2010 pelting stones at the Indian armed personnel. The media was quick to take note of the emotional and performative sparks in the protest. Consider this excerpt from the *Washington Post*:

‘Today, stones are our only message of resistance,’ he said. ‘If we don’t throw stones, India and the world will think everything is fine in Kashmir. It’s not.’⁵¹

The process of capturing the affective and performative aspects, mediation again reiterates the position of the protesters as subaltern as opposed to the state that continues to ‘think everything is fine in Kashmir.’

Subalternity Reified?

Social change has been sparked, fuelled and aided by mediation in various ways around the world. If mediation reinforces subalternity, the questions remain to be asked if that is a desideratum. That is, does reinforcement of the subaltern image also lead to a concretisation of the same into a static, unchanging condition via mediation? This would be a dangerous path to take, for the very school of post-colonial theorisation has laboured to reinforce the image of subaltern so as to outline her as a separate constituent in the bricolage of actors dominating history. The purpose was not to propose subalternity as the perennial state to be in so as to

⁵¹ Emily Wax, ‘In Kashmir, Stone Throwers Face Off with Indian Security Forces’. *Washington Post* (17 July 2010) [<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/16/AR2010071606047.html>, accessed 10 July 2014]

remain distinct from the powerful. Likewise, while mediation aids the politics of the subaltern, it need not propose subalternity to be the desired newsworthy state. It remains to be seen how in the age of self-mediation, which benefits from the neoliberal easing out of access to communication channels, the subaltern emerges from the ashes of post-coloniality and exploits media structures – whether they restrict themselves to reinforcing their subalternity through opportunities of mediation and present their subalternity to be the very reason why they are newsworthy, or they exploit the media opportunity structures to overhaul structures of discrimination. The subaltern is unlikely to do the former, with a teleological motive of being recognised as subaltern, as that would curiously contradict the very purpose of their struggle – social change. Yet, as many new actors – the LGBT community⁵², the unemployed, migrants, religious minorities, etc. – increasingly position the narratives of their struggles in the language of subalternity, we need to observe how mediation may become *the* chosen space to establish a detailed subaltern character.

Pansters has claimed that the notion of representation loses validity when the identity of social agents is seen as the consequence of mere articulatory practices.⁵³ The above discussion clearly shows that this claim has limited valence as representation continues to be problematic while the subalterns continuously reinforce subalternity through the articulatory opportunities available in the media. The processes of *vertretung* and *darstellung* compete with each other to produce disparate narratives of resistance. Simultaneously, they become party to the reassertion of the subaltern identity. Thus, the subaltern do not lose their claim to subalternity, after accessing

⁵² The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

⁵³ Wil Pansters, 'Social Movement and Discourse: The Case of the University Reform Movement in 1961 in Puebla, Mexico,' in *Bulletin of Latin American Research* Vol. 9, no. 1(1990), pp.79-101.

avenues to speak and be heard; rather, the mediation process becomes a part of the reassertion of subalternity. Above, I demonstrated how the micro-level playing out of the complex globalised media ecology could be analysed at the level of local protests. Representation can be used as a lens to understand how the global media produces narratives on the subaltern, in order to seek spaces for reorienting the narratives. There are, of course, limitations in my argument: there might be stealthy ways in which global mediation contributes to new ways of muting the subaltern voice while claiming to represent them. Such portrayals of subaltern resistance point at the structural constraints in the media that the subaltern will have to continue to negotiate, even while the new subaltern resistance have internalised mediation as a core feature of its articulation. *In toto*, this reiterates Shome and Hegde's observation that the politics of the subaltern and that of communication studies are mutually imbricated. While more instances might be systematically studied, the Koodankulam and Kashmir issues are useful in bringing out the analytical utility as well as limitations of foregrounding representation in media narratives on the subaltern. This statement should be qualified with the caveat that while it gives a semblance of the media-subaltern ecology, further enquiry is needed to check if the subaltern is content with the kind of representation that follows, and to map the critique of the media that they engage in. Coming from two different forms of resistance movements in the subcontinent, the two case studies show how the politics of representation can become equally pertinent to all kinds of resistance movements. While this paper analysed *global* mediation of local protests, an analysis could also be made of the characteristics of post-mediation characteristics of subalternity in the narratives of the mainstream corporate media in India.